



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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11 March 2004

### IRN42411.E

Iran: Update to IRN19941 of 27 February 1995 and IRN27724 of 26 August 1997 on the situation of Mandaeans, including their treatment by the government and law enforcement authorities and reports of kidnapping and forced conversion to Islam of Mandaean children  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Mandaeanism is a religion with "ancient Gnostic origins" that predates Christianity (Worldhistory.com 2004; *International Religious Freedom Report for 2003* 18 Dec. 2003, sec. I). Mandaeans consider John the Baptist to be their main prophet, ultimately stemming from Adam, who they believe received the first religious instructions to the Mandaeans (Worldhistory.com 2004; Mandaean World 1997; *ibid.* n.d.a). Their scripture, known as Ginza Rba, contains the book of John the Baptist and is written in Mandaean, which is closely related to the Aramaic language (Worldhistory.com 2004). Mandaeans

... have a hierarchical clergy, practice frequent baptism and hold worship on Sundays. They deplore fasting, monasticism, and the celibacy of Christian nuns, monks and (in some Christian denominations) priests and bishops (*ibid.*).

Historically, Mandaeans were found throughout Persia and Babylonia (*ibid.*). For the past 2000 years, they have "resided along the banks of the Lower Euphrates and Tigris rivers in Southern Iraq and in Khuzestan (Iran) along the Karun River" (Mandaean World n.d.b). Today, Mandaeans also reside in larger cities such as Baghdad and Ahwaz (*ibid.*). According to one source, many Mandaeans have left this region "during the unstable political climate [that has existed] since the 1990s, and ended up as refugees all over the world" (Worldhistory.com 2004). Currently, there are approximately 5,000 to 10,000 Mandaeans residing primarily in the Khuzestan province of Iran (*International Religious Freedom Report for 2003* 18 Dec. 2003, sec. I).

In its *International Religious Freedom Report for 2003* the United States Department of State reports that in Iran, "the Mandaeans are regarded as Christians and are included among the country's three recognized minorities" (*ibid.*). However, according to information posted on the Mandaean World Website, Mandaeanism "lost its recognition since the fall of Shah Reza Pahlavi" (1997). This information is corroborated by information posted on the Website of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), "a network of churches in 121 nations that have each formed an evangelical alliance and over 100 international organizations joining together to give a worldwide identity, voice and platform to more than 335 million Christians" (5 Apr. 2003), which states that "[i]n Iran, Mandaeans are an illegal sect without religious or legal recognition" (24 July

2003).

Mandaeans, according to the Department of State report, face "discrimination similar to that faced by the country's other religious minorities" (*International Religious Freedom Report for 2003* 18 Dec. 2003, sec. I). Information on the Website of the Coalition for the Defense of Human Rights, an international civil rights movement for the victims of jihad and islamization" (n.d.), indicates that there is "overwhelming evidence that Mandaeans have a long history of discrimination and suffering at the hands of Islamists in their countries of origin in the Middle East, namely Iraq and Iran" (20 Nov 2003). However, the information does not describe the kind of evidence, discrimination or suffering that is experienced by Mandaeans in Iran.

Several news reports have also written about the situation of Mandaeans in Iran. The Australia-based newspaper, *The Age*, declared that Mandaeans "face persecution in Iran" (27 Jan. 2003). A letter to the editor published in *The Age* in November 2003, said that Mandaeans

... are cruelly persecuted by fanatics of the Islamic religion who believe the Mandaeans to be infidels. Acts of violence, which include murder and rape of women and girls, are forms of ethnic cleansing carried out against them (7 Nov. 2003).

The *Sydney Morning Herald*, also reported that Mandaeans in Iran are considered by the country's government to be "'infidels'" (29 May 2003). The article also that they are

... not ... allowed to handle food in public markets as many Muslims in Iran believe they are 'unclean.' Their children are forced to study the Koran, and there are reports that the women are not legally protected against sexual assault (*Sydney Morning Herald* 29 May 2003).

According to the WEA, "[t]he Mandaeans have survived 1400 years of Islamic persecution," and that in Islamic communities, they are "regarded as infidels (kaffir) and unclean (najes), hence they can have great difficulty obtaining employment and education" (WEA 24 July 2003). In respect of sexual assault,

Islamic judges in Iran have set the precedent that the rape of a Mandaean woman can be regarded as an act of 'purification,' and as such, violators receive impunity. In Iran this defence has been used to acquit men of rapes on Mandaean girls as young as 8 years old (ibid.).

WEA also indicates that Mandaeans are harassed and abused in the streets and during Mandaean baptismal ceremonies, and that "Mandaean couples are often forced to divorce so that Muslim marriages can be imposed upon them, thus ensuring the Mandaeans lose their Mandaean identity" (ibid.). According to a report by The Sabeen Mandaean Association of Australia (SMAA), which is posted on the Website of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, "Mandeans have remained unmixed with any other race or religion for thousands of years" (17 July 2002).

According to a Mandaean Archbishop in Australia, who visited Iran in May 2003, "the situation for Mandaeans in Iran has ... deteriorated considerably since

the fall of Baghdad, and there is much fear" (WEA 24 July 2003).

The Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations in Sydney, Australia, informed the Research Directorate via correspondence that while it has "anecdotal evidence from Iranian refugees [in Australian] detention camps ...that [Mandaeans in Iran] are being persecuted," the Centre is "unable to substantiate any claims" (4 Mar. 2004).

The report by The SMAA describes the situation of Mandaean children in Iran in the following way:

[they] are forced to study the *Qur'an* and the Islamic religion, knowing ... that it is not the faith of their parents. They are bullied incessantly by Muslim children, ... they are not allowed to play with Muslim children and are ostracized in school playgrounds; disputes and disagreements between children are almost always resolved in favour of the Muslim child; they are not allowed to drink from the water fountains utilized by Muslim children as they are told they would contaminate the water due to their Mandaeanism (17 July 2002).

In respect of forced conversion to Islam of Mandaean children, the report writes that there have been "a number" of cases where conversion was carried out, and there have been "a larger number" of incidents where Mandaean children have been "threatened with abduction and forced conversion" (SMAA 17 July 2002). According to the report, these threats are "often but not exclusively used as a tool by corrupt authorities and criminals to extort money from well-to-do Mandaean jewellers" (ibid.).

Additional information on kidnapping and forced conversion to Islam of Mandaean children could not be found by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

#### References

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#### Additional Sources Consulted

The Mandai Studies Center of Iran did not respond to a letter requesting information.

**Internet sites, including:** Al-Bawaba, Amnesty International (AI), BBC, European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI), Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Iran Expert* [London, UK], *The Iranian* [San Francisco], *Iran News* [Tehran], Iran News Watch, Iran Press Service, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), Minority Rights Group International, ReligiousTolerance.org, United Kingdom Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND)

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